

AN OBSERVATION OF PIRACY IN THE BLACK FALCON, *Falco Subniger* AT DARWIN N.T.

By Mr. J.A. Estbergs and Mr. R. Garstone

On the afternoon of the 7th of August 1977, we were taking observations on the feeding behaviour of Grass Owls (*Tyto longimembris*) at Holmes Jungle floodplain area, a distance of approximately 12 kilometres east of Darwin. On this occasion were accompanied by Mr. H.A.F. Thompson, Ms C. Petersen, Mr. D. Kingston.

We had been visiting the area morning and evening over the past three days and had seen a Black Falcon present on most trips.

At about 1830 hours which was half an hour before sunset we were looking through binoculars at three Grass Owls 100 metres away flying at about four metres above the ground. We made a quick scan of the area to try to locate more Grass Owls and observed a Black Falcon flying low and rapidly over the plain behind us. We returned our attention to the owls in front of us just in time to see one dive into the grass. A few seconds later it rose with a rat clutched in its talons. We then heard a bird call to our right and looked in that direction seeing another Black Falcon. This bird was flying low and swiftly towards the Grass Owl with the rat. The Black Falcon was being pursued by two Little Falcons

(*Falco longipennis*), these birds having made the call. They dive bombed the Black Falcon which skillfully avoided them and drew closer to the Grass Owl with the rat. On catching up to the Grass Owl the Black Falcon did not slow up. It came up from underneath the Grass Owl, rolled over in flight and plucked the rat from the owl's grasp. This interaction took only seconds. The Black Falcon continued on flying away low and fast with the two Little Falcons still in pursuit. The chase went on for another 100 metres after which the Little Falcons broke off their attacks. The Black Falcon flew on and over a hill with its stolen meal.

To the best of our knowledge this is the first recorded event of piracy by a Black Falcon, and probably the first act of piracy ever recorded where an owl was the pirate's victim.

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